

Remarks of Secretary Kempthorne
All Employee Meeting on Health and Safety Issues
May 22, 2007

As I approach my first anniversary as Secretary of the Interior, I want to thank all of you for making my first year so enjoyable and so personally rewarding. I have had the opportunity to travel thousands of miles across the country and meet many of our employees.

I've visited national parks, national wildlife refuges, Indian schools and reservations, Bureau of Reclamation dams, BLM lands, offshore oil and gas platforms, scientific research facilities and many of the 2,400 field stations and offices that make up the department.

I've seen the work you are doing in service to our country. I have been impressed by your professionalism, your talent, and your commitment. I am proud that I have the honor of being your Secretary.

The Department of the Interior has a vast mandate and, obviously, as the Secretary, I have been called on to address many issues. Two vital issues are at the top of my list that affect the internal operations of the Department.

The first issue I have already talked to you about and that is reinforcing the ethical standards and practices of the Department. The second is ensuring the health and safety of our employees, our volunteers and the visitors to the lands we manage.

I have spoken to you in the past about ethics and we have taken a number of steps to ensure our standards and practices are the best they can possibly be. I believe we are making great strides in that area.

Today, I want to talk to you about an even more important issue . . .and that is the health and safety of everyone who works at the Department. I want to emphasize that there is nothing more important to me personally and to the Department's mission than ensuring that your workplace is healthy and safe and that employees, volunteers and visitors to our parks, refuges, and other lands are protected from hazards, accidents and other dangers.

We face a significant challenge in this regard. We have 73,000 employees and 200,000 volunteers. We welcome millions of visitors to our lands and facilities each year. We work in a wide variety of settings: in urban offices and laboratories, in remote parks and refuges, and on massive hydroelectric dams and offshore oil and gas rigs.

Our employees carry out a multitude of tasks, many of which involve substantial dangers and risks. These include law enforcement, wildland firefighting, search and rescue, wilderness assessments, road and building maintenance and park, refuge and fishery management.

The Department of the Interior has the third largest law enforcement force in the federal government, numbering more than 4,000 people. A number of our parks, refuges and recreational areas lie along the U.S- Mexican Border, an increasingly dangerous area frequented by drug cartels and smugglers.

Some of our buildings, including our Main Interior Building here in Washington, are old and need updating. They need to be brought up to code.

Meeting this challenge is not easy, but, as Secretary, I am committed to ensuring we do meet it. We will seek to provide the personnel and organizational resources necessary to reach the highest standards of occupational health and workplace safety.

Last year, the Department suffered eight fatalities of on-duty employees as well as 1,800 workplace injuries. Five of these fatalities involved vehicle or motorized equipment accidents. This is not acceptable.

We took time last week to remember our colleagues who died while on duty. In our remembrance, we thought of their families as well. Each of these eight employees left their homes in the morning, and never returned to their families. The heartache is unbearable for a family member to receive a phone call or a visit at home from a fellow Interior employee saying,

“We are so very sorry to have to tell you that your husband had an accident and died while at work today.”

Think what it must be like to have to place a call or deliver that news face to face. Some of you have to make those calls, and you know the anguish that ensues.

We must do all that we responsibly can to avoid having to place such tragic calls. We must do all that we responsibly can to have a work environment that emphasizes safety avoids accidents. We must do all that we responsibly can to make Interior a model workplace when it comes to safety.

Yes, we have made some progress. Statistics show that the Department had a better safety record in 2006 than it did in 2005. Our total injury case rate and lost-time injury case rate declined.

That's good, but it's not good enough.

While it is unrealistic to think that no one will ever be hurt on the job or that no visitor will ever be injured, we can't settle for business as usual. We must have an attitude that no accident or health hazard is acceptable.

This morning I'd like to take a few minutes to discuss some of the health, safety and security programs that are in place as well as some future initiatives we have planned.

Deputy Assistant Secretary Larry Parkinson, National Business Center Director Doug Bourgeois, and Director of the Office of Occupational Health and Safety Diane Schmitz will speak in greater detail about each of these areas, but I'd like to share some of the things we are doing:

To begin with, Deputy Secretary Lynn Scarlett suggested to the Inspector General's office that it conduct a department-wide evaluation of the effectiveness of our health and safety programs at Interior. Various department and bureau offices have been working with the Inspector General's team for the past several months to provide the information needed for this evaluation. I look forward to the Inspector Generals report and recommendations on how we can improve.

Earlier this year, Interior's National Business Center took the initiative to conduct environmental, safety and health audits of major departmental facilities, including the Main and South Interior Buildings here in Washington and the Department of the Interior Building in Denver. The center contracted for these audits as a proactive way to ensure health and safety at these major workplaces.

The studies produced a total of 94 findings of which 73 were related to safety and health and 21 were environmental. Though the report will not be finalized until May 24, we have already taken corrective action on 53 percent of the findings, while work continues on longer-term challenges. We are fully committed to addressing all of the findings in a timely and comprehensive manner. I commend the National Business Center for taking the initiative to identify problems and find out where improvements were needed.

The Main Interior Building poses special challenges. This historic building is more than 70 years old and is undergoing a major, multi-year modernization to refurbish the structure, remove or safely seal the asbestos, and bring the building up to code. The modernization project moves from wing to wing about every 12 to 16 months. Doug and his staff are doing yeoman work overseeing the job and ensuring that employees are kept safe from hazards as it continues.

Those who work in Main Interior see each day the precautions that we are taking. Work areas are sealed off. Negative air pressure in the work area ensures asbestos and other potentially dangerous substances do not leak around the edges. Monitors on each floor – devices that look a bit like miniature microphones – ensure that if there is any accidental release we will know about it immediately.

I know that many of you in the Washington area have concerns about what would happen in the event of a major terrorist attack or other similar crisis. We are continuously taking action to improve the response to various threats. I recently approved a new Emergency Operations Center -- now under construction as part of the Main Interior Building Modernization project -- to enhance our intelligence, information dissemination, and response to emergencies.

We also finalized a comprehensive revision of the Department's Continuity of Operations Plan, which ensures that Interior can carry out essential functions and restore normal activities in response to a wide range of emergencies. Many of you participated in last week's Pinnacle exercise. I want to commend all of you who took part and those who took part in last year's exercise. These exercises are invaluable in training us to deal with unexpected crises, no matter what form they might take.

We are heading into the busy summer season when historically the number of injuries and accidents increase because we have more visitors, volunteers and employees outdoors. I want to emphasize that this is a time when our employees and volunteers need to be especially vigilant, both for your own safety and for the safety of others. If you sense that you are getting into an unsafe situation, get out immediately and don't take any chances. If you see someone else taking unnecessary risks, act before an accident or injury occurs.

I also want to encourage all employees to report anything they believe might present an undue threat. We are all responsible in this regard for ensuring the safety of our workplaces.

We have much work to do. Together, let us make health and safety “Job 1” at the Department of the Interior.

I now want to turn to Doug Bougeois, who will provide more detail on our initiatives.